

Abraham Lincoln .. Speaks

The most universally beloved American personality is the tall, gaunt, melancholy Abraham Lincoln. In him were embodied the best qualities of the pioneer—physical strength; simplicity; honesty; humor; love of God, man, and nature.

Lincoln was born in a log cabin on the Kentucky frontier on February 12, 1809. As a young man he worked as a rail-splitter, postman, and lawyer. In his spare time he educated himself. His political career began in 1834 with his election to the Illinois legislature. In 1858 his debates with Stephen Douglas catapulted him into national prominence. Although he lost that election, the reputation he gained helped elect him President in 1860.

Immediately after his inauguration, the Civil War started. Lincoln strongly opposed slavery and unsuccessfully advocated freeing the slaves by payment to their masters. But events during the war eventually led him to issue the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing on January 1, 1863, all slaves in the rebellious territory. His assassination on April 14, 1865, was a national tragedy, bringing into power the opponents of his conciliatory policy towards the defeated South.

Upon his death a great Russian writer characterized Abraham Lincoln as "a Christ in miniature." Certainly he ranks high among the world's great men. Much of the wisdom which he gained in the years of solitude in the forest, in his intimate contacts with people in the village store or in the law office and court room, and during the turbulent years as war-time President, can be helpful to us today as he speaks:

ON HIS EARLY LIFE . . .

"All that I am or ever hope to be, I owe to my mother."

"It is great folly to make anything out of me or my early life. It can all be condensed into a single sentence and that sentence you will find in Gray's *Elegy*: 'The short and simple annals of the poor.'"

"The way for a young man to rise is to improve himself in every way he can, never suspecting that anybody wishes to hinder him. Allow me to assure you that suspicion and jealousy never did help any man in any situation. There may sometimes be ungenerous attempts to keep a young man down; and they will succeed, too, if he allows his mind to be diverted from its true channel to brood over the attempted injury."

ON PERSONAL INTEGRITY . . .

"I desire to conduct the affairs of this administration that if at the end, when I come to lay down the reins of power, I have lost every other friend on earth, I shall at least have one friend left, and that friend shall be down inside of me."

"I am not bound to win, but I am bound to be true. I am not bound to succeed, but I am bound to live up to what light I have. I must stand with anybody that stands right; stand with him while he is right and part with him when he goes wrong."

ON CONCERN FOR OTHERS . . .

"I hold that while man exists it is his duty to improve not only his own condition, but to assist in ameliorating the condition of mankind. . . . I am for those means which will give the greatest good to the greatest number."

ON EDUCATION . . .

"Upon the subject of education. . . . I can only say that I view it as the most important subject which we as a people can be engaged in. That every man receive at least a moderate education, and thereby be enabled to read the histories of his own and other countries, by which we may duly appreciate the value of our free institutions, appears to be an object of vital importance, even on this account alone, to say nothing of the advantages and satisfaction to be derived from all being able to read the Scriptures and other works, both of a religious and moral nature, for themselves."

ON RELIGION . . .

Asked why he did not join a church, Lincoln replied, "Because I have found difficulty, without mental reservation, in giving my assent to their long and complicated confessions of faith. When any church will inscribe over its altar the Saviour's condensed statement of law and gospel—"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy mind, and love thy neighbor as thyself"—that church will I join with all my heart."

"If the Lord did not answer prayer, I could not stand it. And if I did not believe in a God who works His will with nations, I should despair of the Republic."

"I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My wisdom, and that of all about me, seemed insufficient for that day."

Referring to the Bible, Lincoln gave this advice: "Take all of this book upon reason that you can, and the balance on faith, and you will live and die a happier and better man."

ON EQUALITY . . .

"I think the authors of that notable instrument (the Declaration of Independence) intended to include all men, but they did not intend to declare all men equal in all respects. They did not mean to say that all were equal in color, size, intellect, moral developments, or social capacity. They defined with tolerable distinctness in what respects they did consider all men were created equal,—equal with 'certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.' This they said and this they meant. They did not mean to assert the obvious untruth that all were then actually enjoying that equality, nor yet that they had no power to confer such a boon. They meant simply to declare the right, so that the enforcement of it might follow as circumstances would permit. They meant to set up a standard maxim for free society, which should be familiar to all and revered by all,—constantly looked to, constantly approximated, and thereby constantly spreading and deepening its influence, and augmenting the happiness and value of life to all people of all colors everywhere."

"As a nation we began by declaring that all men are created equal. We now practically read it, all men are created equal except negroes. When the Know-Nothings (a political party opposed chiefly to Catholics and foreigners) get control, it will read, all men are created equal except negroes and foreigners and Catholics."

ON THE NEGRO . . .

"I hold if the Almighty had ever made a set of men that should do all the eating, and none of the work, He would have made them with mouths only and no hands, and if He had ever made another class that He had intended should do all the work and none of the eating, He would have made them without

mouths, and all hands."

"You mean the whites are intellectually the superiors of the blacks, and therefore have the right to enslave them? Take care again. By this rule you are to be slave to the first man you meet with an intellect superior to your own. But, say you, it is a question of interest, and if you can make it your interest you have the right to enslave another. Very well. And if he can make it his interest, he has the right to enslave you."

ON EMANCIPATION OF THE NEGRO . . .

"Gradual and not sudden emancipation is better for all."

In outlining his hope for a plan of compensated emancipation, Lincoln asserted: "How much better to thus save the money which else we sink forever in the war. How much better to do it while we can, lest the war ere long render us pecuniarily unable to do it. How much better for you as seller, and the nation as buyer, to sell out and buy out that without which the war could never have been, than to sink both the thing sold and the price of it in cutting one another's throats."

ON THE TREATMENT OF A DEFEATED PEOPLE . . .

"I shall do nothing in malice; what I deal with is too vast for malicious dealing."

"With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right,—let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and his orphan; to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves, and with all nations." (From the Second Inaugural Address.)

ON DEMOCRATIC GOVERNMENT . . .

"The ballot is stronger than the bullet."

"As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master. This expresses my idea of democracy. Whatever differs from this, to the extent of the difference, is no democracy."

"The legitimate object of government is to do for a community of people whatever they need to have done, but cannot do at all or cannot do so well for themselves in their separate and individual capacities. In all that the people can individually do as well for themselves, the government ought not to interfere."

"No policy that does not rest upon philosophical public opinion can be permanently maintained."

"I go for all sharing the privileges of the government who assist in bearing its burdens. Consequently, I go for admitting all whites to the right of suffrage who pay taxes or bear arms (by no means excluding females)." Taken from a letter to *The Journal*, 1836.

"My political education strongly inclines me against a very free use of any of these means by the executive to control the legislature of the country. As a rule, I think it better that Congress should originate as well as perfect its measures without external bias. . . ."

"This country, with its institutions, belongs to the people who inhabit it. Whenever they shall grow weary of the existing government, they can exercise their constitutional right of amending it, or their revolutionary right to dismember or overthrow it."

" . . . government of the people, by the people, and for the people. . . ."

ON FARMERS AND FARMING . . .

"But farmers being the most numerous class, it follows that their interest is the largest interest. It also follows that that interest is most worthy of all to be cherished and cultivated—that if there be inevitable conflict between that interest and any other, that other should yield."

"The ambition for broad acres leads to poor farming, even with men of energy."

ON LABORERS AND LABOR . . .

"Labor is prior to and independent of capital. Capital is only the fruit of labor, and could never have existed if labor had not first existed. Labor is the superior of capital and deserves much the higher consideration. Capital has its rights, which are as worthy of protection as any other rights. Nor is it denied that there is, and probably always will be, a relation between labor and capital producing mutual benefits. The error is in assuming that the whole labor of the community exists within that relation."

"No men living are more worthy to be trusted than those who toil up from poverty, none less inclined to take or touch aught which they have not honestly earned. Let them beware of surrendering a political power which they already possess, and which, if surrendered will merely be used to close the door of advancement against such as they, and to fix new disabilities and burdens upon them, 'till all of liberty be lost."

"The strongest bond of human sympathy, outside of the family relation, should be one uniting all working people of all nations and tongues and kindreds. Nor should this lead to a war upon property or the owners of property."

THE GETTYSBURG ADDRESS

"Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field as a final resting-place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this. But in a larger sense we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us, the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us, that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they give the last full measure of devotion,—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain, that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, and for the people shall not perish from the earth."

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5c per copy; \$1.50 for 50; \$2.75 for 100

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